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ABSTRACT

This brochure deals with issues concerning tenure in the form of contrasting "myths" and "realities." Some of these include the "myth" that tenure is a lifetime job guarantee whereas "in reality" tenure is a right to due process; the "myth" that tenured faculty do not work very hard though "in reality" surveys clearly show that tenured faculty generally publish more, serve on more committees and teach more than their untenured colleagues; that "academic freedom" is unnecessary since the Constitution protects academic freedom when "in reality" academic freedom is important because society needs safe havens where conventional wisdom can be challenged and new ideas tested; and finally, that most faculty have tenure when "in reality" most college faculty are not tenured since more colleges are relying on part-time or temporary nontenure-track faculty to teach undergraduates. Other "myths" and "realities" addressed include the "myth" that nontenured new positions give colleges flexibility whereas the "reality" is that such positions save the institution money but at the cost of lower academic quality. The brochure stresses that to reach the educational standards society wants, a corps of full-time, experienced faculty is required and the due process protected by tenure can contribute to this goal. (JLS)

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Truth About Tenure In Higher Education

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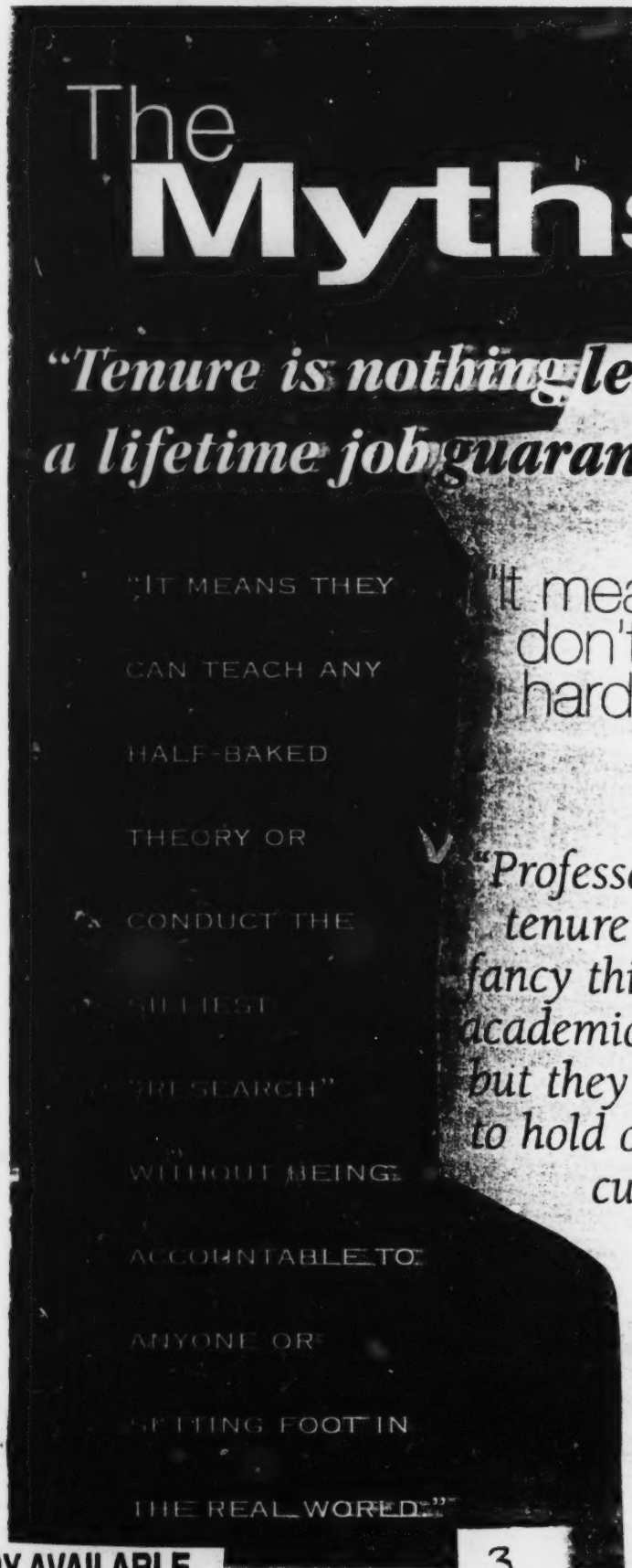
The Myths...

"Tenure is nothing less than a lifetime job guarantee."



"It means professors don't need to work hard or care about students."

"Professors defend tenure by saying fancy things about academic freedom, but they just want to hold on to their cushy jobs."

"Tenure keeps new, fresh talent from moving up the ladder and makes it hard for colleges to meet the changing needs of their students."

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Now the Facts

You may well have heard attacks like these on tenure and college faculty. After all, people write books and get quoted in the press grinding this ax. The argument is not hard to believe, either; we've all seen people in authority, private and public, who care more about protecting themselves than serving their customers. You may have memories of a teacher who didn't seem to keep up with his or her subject or care very much about his or her students.

But there's a big problem with the negative polemics about tenure: They are not true. They're just not true. This brochure deals with some of the myths about tenure and responds with the facts. It tells the truth about tenure—a human institution with flaws—but a practice we can be proud of and need to maintain.

MYTH:

Tenure is a lifetime job guarantee.

REALITY:

Tenure is simply a right to due process; it means that a college or university cannot fire a tenured professor without presenting evidence that the professor is incompetent or behaves unprofessionally or that an academic department needs to be closed or the school is in serious financial difficulty. Nationally, about 2 percent of tenured faculty are dismissed in a typical year.[1]

If it is difficult—purposely difficult—to fire a tenured professor, it's also very hard to become one. The probationary period averages three years for community colleges and *seven years* at four-year colleges. This is a period of employment insecurity almost unique among U.S. professions. People denied tenure at the end of this time lose their jobs; tenure is an "up-or-out" process.

During the probationary period, almost all colleges can choose not to renew faculty contracts and terminate faculty *without any reason or cause*. Throughout this time, senior professors and administrators evaluate the work of new faculty—teaching, research and service—before deciding whether or not to recommend tenure. The most recent survey of American faculty shows that, in a typical year, about one in five probationary faculty members was denied tenure and lost his or her job.[2]

Faculty members remain accountable after achieving tenure. Tenured faculty at most colleges and universities are evaluated periodically—among other things, for promotion, salary increases and, in some cases, merit increases. Grant applications and articles for publication are routinely reviewed on their merit by peers in the field. *If basic academic tenets and due process rights are observed, this kind of accountability is wholly appropriate.* A finding of incompetence or unprofessional conduct can still result in firing.

MYTH:

Tenured faculty don't work very hard. And when they do work, they spend too much time doing meaningless research and too little time teaching

REALITY:

Surveys show clearly that tenured faculty generally publish more, serve on more committees *and teach more* than their untenured colleagues. On average, faculty work 52 hours per week.[3]

Full-time, tenured faculty must serve on academic committees and, at most four-year colleges and universities, conduct research as well. In spite of these requirements, faculty responding to surveys overwhelmingly report that teaching is their favorite responsibility and that they do more teaching than anything else. According to a government survey, *even faculty at research universities spend considerably more time teaching than conducting research.*[4]

With regard to research, colleges and universities have very different missions. At a major research university, it is perfectly appropriate to place great importance on the faculty's research performance. Community colleges place much less emphasis on research, concentrating almost entirely on undergraduate instruction. Other colleges and universities fall somewhere in between.

It is wrong in any case to think of research as the enemy of good teaching. Research and teaching go hand in hand. The best educators are "up" on the latest research and able to inspire students with stories of their own inquiries and interests.

First and foremost, colleges are places of inquiry, and inquiry is the basis of America's economy, health and culture. Over the years, innovations as varied as margarine, air bags, life-saving pharmaceuticals and now the Internet have resulted from basic or applied research that was college or university based.

Recent studies indicate that research is valued too much, and good teaching too little, in getting the best

salaries at many four-year colleges and universities.[3] This imbalance is not created by uncaring professors but by fierce institutional competition for government and private research dollars. Generally—and depending on the college's mission—our unions believe there should be a greater emphasis on good teaching in tenure and promotion decisions and that there should be other rewards for good teaching as well.

MYTH:

Professors say they need tenure to have "academic freedom," which sounds too much like the freedom to do or say whatever they want, no matter how radical or inconsequential. Anyway, the Constitution protects academic freedom; you don't need tenure for that.

REALITY:

Academic freedom is important because society needs "safe havens," places where students and scholars can challenge the conventional wisdom of any field—art, science, politics or whatever. This is not a threat to society; it strengthens society. It puts ideas to the test and teaches students to think and defend their ideas. But how many professors would feel free to talk about controversial ideas if they knew their jobs were on the line?

Tenure gives faculty the independence to speak out about troubling matters and to challenge the administration on issues of new curriculum and quality. The problem could be academic: For example, an untenured professor was fired by the University of Georgia when she blew the whistle on the administration's practice of changing grades and waiving academic standards for athletes. (She was reinstated after a lengthy court battle.) The problem could be political. In Oklahoma, a number of state legislators attempted to have Anita Hill fired from her university position because of her testimony before the U.S. Senate. If not for tenure, professors could be attacked every time there's a change in the wind.

The First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech, but the Constitution does not guarantee that you can't be fired for expressing your beliefs as part of your job.

The courts could decide either way—and the burden of proof shifts sharply to the professor.

What if dismissed professors always had to go to the courts to seek fair treatment? The governance process under tenure may seem cumbersome, but it doesn't hold a candle to the time and expense of moving disputes from the college board room to the courtroom.

Remember: There *are* limits to tenure. Tenure does *not* mean that a science teacher can hold students to his or her belief that the sun revolves around the earth, and it doesn't mean professors can act unprofessionally.

MYTH:

Just about all professors have tenure.

REALITY:

Most professors *do not* have tenure, and that's not good.

No more than one-third of all college and university faculty members are tenured. The reason? More and more colleges are relying on part-time or temporary nontenure-track faculty to teach undergraduates—part-timers constituted about 38 percent of the professoriate in 1987 and grew to 43 percent in 1992.[6]

When a tenured professor retires or a new position is created, too often the new position is not put on the tenure track. Colleges say this gives them greater flexibility to meet student needs. But the real reason is to save money, and the real effect is to lower standards.

Part-time faculty are not unqualified, but they are exploited. Most part-time faculty earn very low "per course" salaries and few, if any, benefits. The nature of their employment (many have a full-time job off campus) often does not enable them to advise students adequately, conduct research or contribute to the academic direction of the institution. A recent national survey indicates one half of part-time faculty do not hold office hours or meet with students outside the classroom.[7]

It's hard for demoralized faculty members, always conscious of their vulnerability, to bring into the classroom the confidence and creativity necessary for fine teaching. It's a double shame when part-time faculty are hired to teach courses largely subscribed by part-time students and/or students with special needs, the very students with the greatest need for instructors who are fully connected to the institution and its resources.

So, are you saying everything's perfect?

No, we're not. On many four-year college campuses, excellent teaching does not count enough in earning tenure and is not rewarded enough in promotions or salary increases. The tenure process can be too rigid. For example, it's not easy for faculty to take a break during the three- to seven-year year tenure clock in order to care for young children. New minority and women faculty sometimes feel pressured to serve on multiple college committees, only to find at tenure time that their committee service doesn't count much. On many campuses, higher education unions are pushing to place more emphasis on teaching and improve tenure procedures.

Colleges and universities also need to do a better job of setting concrete goals, evaluating successes and failures, and talking plainly to the public about them. Professors who have tenure, just like anyone else, need to be held accountable for their performance. But when a faculty member does the kind of work that's controversial, or just hard to explain to anyone outside a narrow circle of experts, he or she deserves to be protected from endless self-justification and working in a perpetual state of anxiety. That's what peer review and tenure are designed to do.

Summing Up

No matter what we hear from polemicists who should—or do—know better, faculty members win tenure because their senior colleagues are convinced they can perform with excellence and a great deal of independence. Tenured faculty are, in fact, successful, highly self-motivated people with a great deal of professional pride.

Due process is a civilized value; the right measure of job security makes people more productive, not less.

To reach the educational standards we all want, we need to have a corps of full-time, experienced faculty in charge of the academic program and committed to the institution. To keep up quality for the next generation of students, we need to keep up opportunities for the new generation of faculty.

In the final analysis, who is in the best position to put academic standards first and shelve other considerations? College administrators? Elected officials? Professors are not perfect but they *are* educators. If it's solid education we want, tenure matters.

10

Endnotes

1. Institutional Policies and Practices Regarding Faculty in Higher Education, 1990, Table 3.5.
2. National Study of Postsecondary Faculty, 1993.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

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See Also

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